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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR LAGON ENCOURAGES GOS TO APPROVE
ANTI-TIP PENAL CODE AMENDMENTS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador-at-Large for Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Mark Lagon urged Singapore to quickly approve long-delayed anti-TIP Penal Code Amendments during his June 29 visit to Singapore. The GOS explained that the anti-TIP provisions are part of comprehensive reform of the Penal Code and predicted Parliament would approve the bill sometime in the fall of 2007. Ambassador Lagon also encouraged the GOS to improve labor standards and protections for migrant workers. Local NGOs detailed the main problems migrant workers sometimes face, such as shifting contract terms and high placement fees that can leave workers vulnerable to exploitation. One NGO claimed some women from Cambodia, Vietnam and China were trafficked into prostitution, having been lured here under false pretenses and then finding themselves indebted and with few options. End Summary.

Penal Code Amendments

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador-at-Large for Trafficking in Persons Mark Lagon participated in an interagency meeting with GOS counterparts from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Manpower, and the Ministry for Community Development, Youth and Sports during his June 29 visit to Singapore. GOS officials offered a lengthy briefing on GOS law and programs related to prostitution and illegal immigration, some of which did not directly address trafficking in persons. Ambassador Lagon explained why, in the 2007 Trafficking in Persons Report, Singapore was downgraded from Tier 1 to Tier 2 status. The principal reason, he noted, was that prostitution was legal for 16 and 17 year olds. In March 2006, the GOS had unveiled proposed amendments to the Penal Code that would bring TIP legislation up to international standards by, inter alia, criminalizing prostitution involving a minor under the age of 18 and extending extra-territorial jurisdiction over Singaporean citizens and permanent residents who purchase or solicit sexual services from minors overseas. Ministry of Home Affairs officials responded that these provisions were part of a comprehensive overhaul of the Penal Code and that issues with many other amendments (unrelated to trafficking) had taken longer than expected to "iron out." The officials predicted that Parliament would likely approve the Penal Code reforms sometime in the fall of 2007.

¶3. (SBU) Lagon noted some other areas in which the GOS could better combat trafficking in persons beyond the matter of legal prostitution for minors, including invigorating a partnership between government and nimble civil society organizations, and conceiving of trafficking victims as indeed victims rather than primarily criminals or illegal aliens. Lagon assured GOS officials that the USG had, despite marked improvements, deficiencies in its own evolving domestic anti-trafficking policy, and offered a partnership to work together to combat the exploitation of vulnerable populations.

Migrant Labor Issues

¶4. (SBU) Ambassador Lagon also encouraged the GOS to take a more expansive view of trafficking and to make efforts to improve labor standards and protections for migrant workers. He suggested that trafficking is not so much about the geographic movement of people as it is about the use of deception and coercion, which can leave victims highly vulnerable. GOS officials highlighted a number of recent efforts to improve standards for migrant workers in Singapore, such as the model labor contract for domestic workers, direct deposit of salaries, and training programs for newly-arrived workers. When there were allegations of worker abuse, the police investigated and intervened promptly, they said. However, in "contractual disputes" over the terms of employment, the employer and employee are encouraged to pursue mediation first or resolve their dispute through the civil courts.

Protection for Migrant Laborers Limited, NGOs Claim

¶5. (SBU) NGOs such as Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME) and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) told Ambassador Lagon that recent GOS initiatives had improved the situation for migrant workers somewhat, but said they did not go far enough and had had a limited impact so far. They said some foreign laborers (largely unskilled or semi-skilled) found that contracts terms they were offered upon arrival in Singapore differed from what recruiting agents had promised

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in their home country. They asserted that some foreign domestic workers owed maid agencies up to a year's salary for placement fees and expenses upon arrival and sometimes were forced (illegally) to surrender their passports until the debt was repaid. This could inhibit the worker's ability to leave abusive employers. Those who did leave and file complaints were referred to organizations such as HOME for shelter. Victims who wished to work could obtain a special employment pass while their claims were adjudicated, but the adjudication process could drag on in some cases for years. The majority had their claims upheld, but were not provided any compensation other than the salary owed before they left the employer.

Prostitution in Singapore

¶6. (SBU) Dr. Edward Job, Founder of the Christian Outreach Center, told Ambassador Lagon that many women from Malaysia and Indonesia knew they were coming to Singapore to engage in prostitution, but that nonetheless they often were severely exploited by pimps and loan sharks. Some women in prostitution from nearby Indonesian islands came to Singapore to work on weekends and returned to Indonesia during the week. However, in some cases women from Cambodia, Vietnam and China were trafficked into the sex trade after being lured here with false promises of work in other industries. Heavily indebted and lacking other options, they were at the mercy of unscrupulous agents who forced them into prostitution.

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